

The Matryoshka Child

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Summary: They thought it would be a standard job; get to the dig site, sweep the area and dig up what tech they could. But one archeologist and a pair of SPARTAN-IV Commandos discover that this job is a lot more complicated than that; an ancient being still calls it home, and it struggles to be set free. Set beteen Halo 3 and 4, minor spoilers for Halo 4, T for violence and some swearing.

1. Prologue-Evil Spirits

The Matryoshka Child

Prologue-Evil Spirits

Hara was shaken awake by her parents in the middle of the night, and as her eyes opened she was bundled into the hidden exit of the cave. She did not ask any questions as her mother grabbed her and almost pulled her into the back of the recess, as her father and the tribe's other men took up their spears and knives with looks of grim determination in their eyes. She remained silent as she and the other women and children scrambled through the small tunnel that was their escape route, and did not complain when she scraped her knee on the rough stone floor or knocked her head on the ceiling.

There were raiders coming in the night, and survival depended on silence.

After a few minutes of crawling, they had broken free of the tunnel, onto the ridgeline above the cave where they could flee to their hiding places in the forest around them. Below her, Hara could hear the sounds of battle, the screams of the dying, yet as she listened, there was something wrong. She knew such noises all to well, but as she listened she could hear a regular, snapping thud, like the beating of the drum, and a sharp, high pitched cracking. A moment later a deep, ear-piercing shriek split the night air, the sound ragged and scraping, terrifying in its volume. The small flight of refugees paused at that, exchanging fearful glances as they wondered

what could be its source; no raider could make that noise, and several of the women murmured the holy words out of reflex before ushering the children on.

No mere raiders had come this night; the spirits of the dead were abroad, and they prayed for the survival of the menfolk below as they distracted the flight of their women and children. Once they were certain they were hidden, the men too would flee, the tribe melting away into the darkness; that was their plan, but if ghosts were descending upon them, things would be different.

There were angry mutterings from one or two of the fugitives, questioning why the shaman's rituals had not worked. The dissenters were silenced soon enough as they focussed on getting away from the angry ghosts that had descended upon their home. They clambered over the roots and fallen trees of the forest, pushing aside underbrush, keeping a wary eye for any stinging insects or snakes underfoot. The moon was shining bright, grey light filtering through the canopy. Hara shivered in the chilly night air, pulling the skins she wore tight around her and wishing she still had her blanket of gazelle hide with her to keep her warm. Her mother laid a hand on her shoulder, and Hara resolved to be brave.

Ahead of them, there was a scream.

Something had cut them off, a dreadful apparition with blue fire burning in its eyes, the light low to the ground. There was a snarl like that of a hunting cat, and a snap; one of the women fell to the ground, bleeding from a wound in her head, and as more lights from the hunting phantoms emerged from the undergrowth and scrambled through the trees, they panicked.

Hara's mother yelled at her to run as the small huddle of fugitives dissolved in a mess of screaming panicked yelling, before she jerked as if struck by a thrown spear. She toppled to the ground, a bleeding hole punched through her chest, and Hara screamed as a monster loomed into view behind her. It ran on four legs, stance loping and low like that of a jackal, glowing blue fires illuminating a head that split into the curved, sideways jaws of an ant, carved from some reflective, shining stone. Glowing spines protruded from its back, quivering in anticipation as it saw her.

She fled, turning and sprinting through the undergrowth as the spirit followed her, snarling and snapping at her heels. She saw another one of them speed towards her from her left, strong claws gripping trees and carrying it towards her branch-to-branch. She changed course, sprinting away from it, gasping for breath as she heard more of its kin snarling and yapping behind her.

At some point, her flight through the darkness of the forest led her to the plains. The moon and stars were shining bright, illuminating the open landscape, and as she glanced skywards she saw more glowing blue lights, more spirits circling in the sky on flaming rings. Desperately hoping they would not notice her, she ran onwards, hunched low to afford some measure of cover.

She stifled a cry of pain as she stepped on a rock and cut her foot, limping onwards. A glance over her shoulder to see more of the stone jackals fanning out across the grasslands behind her and she picked up her pace despite the pain, murmuring the holy words in the hope

that they would not see her.

There was a hollow in the ground ahead of her, a hiding space, and she slid into it, grateful for the refuge and uncaring for any scorpions or snakes that might use it as a den. She curled up into a tight ball, hardly daring to breath as she heard the footsteps of the phantoms hunting her. Their yapping and barks sounded across the plains as she hid, the noise pressing forwards, forwards, to her left and right. A dark, shining shape loped past her, the blue flame in its head lighting up the ground and grass around it. Hara shuffled tighter into her hiding place, squeezing against herself as it paused; she could see the short, stubby tail of the thing twitch as it looked around, and it bounded on. As soon as it grew quiet, she let out the breath she had been holding.

She loosened the grip on her legs, bare feet pressing against the dirt floor as she dared to breath once more. For a few moments, she sat there, resolving to wait until the sun was up and then see what she might do. There would be others hiding, she was sure of that; these spirits might not have caught the rest of them.

The huge, clawed foot stamped down just before the edge of her hiding place, and a figure born of nightmare loomed into view.

It was of the same shining stone as the jackal-spirits had been cut from, its shape a humanoid one but far taller than any man, with its shoulders armoured in a shining carapace like that of a beetle. Some kind of mask, recessed in between its huge, hunched, curved shoulders covered what face it had, and one hand held an oversized knife of blue light. The other reached out and grabbed Hara before she could flee, massive and cold fingers closing around her arm and lifting her up. Without ceremony she was flung over its broad shoulders and left to dangle there, jogging and jolting on its back as it climbed back over the hollow and strode across the plains.

She was carried back towards the entrance of the cave that the tribe had used as a shelter, and there was the stench of death on the air. Bodies and blood were on the ground, and Hara closed her eyes, twisting into the phantom's back to try and look away. She didn't want to see her father's face amongst those of the dead.

A moment later, she was swung off its shoulders and dumped onto the floor. The other children were there, surrounded by a cordon of the huge monsters, and they huddled together, shivering and whimpering. A glance around her showed Hara that every child of the tribe was there, even the infants, but none of the adults were there. She shivered as she imagined what they might have in store for them; were they to be made into slaves in the spirit world, the main dish of some monstrous feast, something even worse?

Two of the giants stepped aside and from between them another figure emerged. This one was smaller than its brethren, slighter in its build, but from the deference they showed it, it was clear that it was in charge. It was formed of the same reflective, shining stone as the other ghosts, its head a boxy mask of two diagonal squares separated by a burning blue line, and it paused before them. As it did so, Hara saw that its cuboid arms were apart from its body, floating next to the shoulder on a rounded joint but somehow not even brushing it.

A line of blue light sprang from where its face would be, sweeping over the huddled children, before it nodded. It pointed at Hara and gave an order in some strange language; one of the giants picked her up and dragged her away as the spirit left the circle. Before it, a whirl of blue light, its centre a black pit, span into being, and it stepped through, disappearing into the unknown.

As she was dragged into the realm of ghosts, struggling and kicking all the while, she could hear the other spirits finishing off the remnants of her tribe.

2. Venture

Chapter 1-Venture

_Earth, Stockholm Station Orbital Defence Platform, 1__st__ June
2554_

The immense vault of the dry dock was heaving with people as Doctor Eszter Arany stepped through the bulkhead that was its entrance. Soldiers in fatigues, crew members, station personnel, all of them were rushing through the large room as they got ready for departure, in the looming shadow of a ship's hull. Slightly overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the activity around her, she paused for a moment as she watched the tumult. After a moment she shook her head, remembering what she was here for; find and report in to Lieutenant Dembski.

She adjusted her shoulder bag and set out across the decking, the flat-soled shoes she wore clanking quietly as she went. She stepped past a soldier pushing a pallet laden with green, UNSC Army-Issue crates, head up and bobbing as she scanned for somebody who looked like they might be in charge.

The first candidate she saw was a tall woman with dirty blonde hair giving orders to a small group of marines loading a crate onto a pallet. As she approached, she caught the tail end of "â€|and I'm sure I don't need to remind you lads how much this stuff costs, so look after it, understood?"

"Understood," one of them replied. "It'll be in mint condition when you unpack."

"That's what I like to hear," the possible Lieutenant Dembski said with a nod. "Get moving, marines."

"Excuse me?" Eszter asked. "You are Lieutenant Dembski?"

The woman turned around to face Eszter, and up close the doctor realised just how tall she was; she towered nearly a head taller than Eszter, and her bare arms were corded with muscle and lined with strangely regular scarring.

"Afraid not, love," she said, the British accent on her voice unmistakable. "I actually work for my pay, for a start. How the hell did you make that mistake?"

"The briefing file just said to come here report into Lieutenant Dembski," Eszter explained. "It just gave the name and nothing else."

You looked like you were giving orders, so I thought I would ask you."

"Fair enough," the woman said. "I'm Sergeant Susan Jones, by the way. What do you need to see the LT about?"

"I am the scientific advisor who has been assigned to the _Venture_," Eszter said.

"Oh, you're the egghead coming with us! Doctorâ€|Arenal, was it?"

"Arany. Eszter Arany," the doctor replied. "Please just call me Eszter, though."

"Alright then, Eszter. Call me Susan, by the way, seeing as you're a civvy," the sergeant replied. "Now come on, let's go find the Rupert."

With Eszter in her wake, Susan cut through the crowd, people parting before her as she forged her way across the crowded dock. She stopped only as a Mantis stomped across her path, weapons replaced with loading claws carrying with crates destined for the ship's hold. Once it had passed by Susan was moving once more and Eszter stopped staring at the imposing walker, following her once more as she headed up a ramp to a raised platform of gunmetal overlooking the bay below. They found the lieutenant tapping the screen of a datapad on a table before him as he issued instructions into the radio piece on his ear. As he finished talking into it, he turned to Susan and Eszter.

"Sergeant Jones," he said. "Who's your friend?"

"The egghead coming with us, sir," Susan replied. "She was looking for you."

"I was wondering when you'd show up," the lieutenant remarked with a glance at Eszter. He was a handsome man, she thought, dark skin, chiselled features and muscled physique certainly making him easy on the eye. "Good to see you're here, Doctor. Lieutenant Jack Dembski; I'm in charge of the platoon looking out for you on Jove."

Eszter shook the hand he proffered, his grip strong but not a squeeze.

"It is good to be here," she replied. "I am looking forward to this job."

"LT, now that you've met our guest, permission to carry on with keeping the grunts in line?" Susan asked.

"Granted, sergeant," Dembski replied. Susan stamped to attention, snapping a salute which the Lieutenant returned, and left.

"So," Eszter asked. "When are we leaving?"

"Oh-nine-hundred hours, provided the loading goes smoothly," Dembski replied. "So far, we're ahead of schedule too, so on the off-chance docking control get the stick out their asses, we might even get to leave early. Don't get your hopes up, though."

"I see," Eszter said. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"To be honest, if you just get to your cabin and unpack without getting in the way for the moment, that would probably be for the best," the lieutenant said. "I'm calling a general briefing once we translate to Slipspace. How much do you know of the situation?"

"A bunch of miners accidentally broke into a Forerunner bunker and the Infinity Initiative wants me to investigate it with your people running security," Eszter said. "I have done some reading up on Jove, but aside from your name being dropped I have not been told about the rest of you."

She frowned, and added; "Though tell me, is it true? That there are SPARTAN-IVs going with us? I have heard talk, but nothing concrete."

"It's true," Dembski said. "Hell you've already met one."

"I have? You meanâ€¦|you mean Sergeant Jones?"

"Yep."

"Oh. She does not strike me as very SPARTAN-like. I thought that a SPARTAN would be more aloof."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too," Dembski said. "And while the sergeant appears to be many things, aloof isn't one of them. Kind of glad about that, to be honest; working with a people person like her is going to be easier than coordinating this op with some distant giant shut away all day in power armour."

"Seems a bit much just for a dig," Eszter said.
>"Yeah, well, if this place is underground then it's probably a bunker of some kind, and that means that the automated defences'll wake up when we approach," Dembski replied. "And if there's one thing we've learnt from the Ark, it's that Sentinels pack one hell of a punch and don't play nice."<p>

"I see," Eszter nodded. "Most of the work I have done has been on places that were cleared out long before I got there, you see; this is the first dig I have been on where I am the first scientist in."

"That so?" Dembski said. "Well, we'll make sure that the ground's clear when you do come in. Oh yeah, if you don't mind me asking, where are you from? I can't place that accent of yours."

"Reach," Eszter said. "I graduated from the University of New Alexandria 2548."

"Ah, right," Demski said. "Huh. Feel bad for asking now."

"Do not," Eszter replied with a shake of her head. "I've dealt with it."

"If you're sure," Dembski said. "Listen, doctor, I've not really got any more time to spare for chatting, so if you want to head onboard the _Venture_ and get your stuff sorted out, you can head to the

ship's mess for oh-nine-thirty hours; I'm calling a briefing then."

"Of course, lieutenant," Eszter said.

"Oh, and doctor," Demski added as she turned to leave. "Good to have you aboard."

"Good to be here," Eszter replied. "I am looking forward to this."

She set off, up the large, wide ramp that lead into the open guts of the _UEG Venture_, the fat-bellied Merchant Navy ship that was carrying her and the soldiers escorting her to Jove. She wound around soldiers heaving or pushing crates into the cargo bays, and had to wait a few moments as a Pelican, engines on low power to hover it only a few above the metal floor, floated through bay's doorway and onto the ground, marines standing by to tether it down for journey.

She stepped round a pair of parked warthogs as she found the entrance to the rest of the ship, a heavy metal blast door that was open as crew members moved through it. She went unnoticed as she stepped into the grey metal corridors of the ship, their only decoration being rivets on the walls and pipes on the ceilings.

Somebody had been considerate enough to bolt a map to the wall of the ship, and she knew that she had cabin four, on the ship's third deck. It was only one short walk and an elevator ride away from her current deck, and a glance at the ship's layout made it pretty clear that almost all of its habitable space was located at the back, near the engines; while the _Venture_ was huge, nearing four kilometres in length, a vast majority of that size was space for storing cargo and nothing else.

Her cabin was a simple room, a small one with a sink and some cupboards on one side of the wall and a cabin bed on the other with a desk tucked underneath it. She dumped the duffel bag containing her clothes on top of the desk; the actual equipment she would need for the dig was stored in the cargo bay below.

She unzipped its top, and eschewed unpacking for a moment to pull out the laptop she carried within it, opening its lid and tapping the on button. She pulled out the small metal box that was nestled between her washbag and a few items of underwear that were of a shade so embarrassingly pink she was almost afraid to wear them even beneath her clothes. She flicked open the latch on the container, and pulled out the AI chip was tucked in the foam that filled most of its empty space. As the laptop booted up, she tucked it into a slot on the computer's side. It chimed, and a few moments later the holographic projector built into it flickered into life.

"Jeez, doc, staying cooped up in that chip there gives me a real crick in the code, y'know," the projection of a young man in a pinstripe suit, tie and trilby complained as it shimmered into view. "Man, it feels good to be back in this computer again; gives me room to breath."

"Good morning, Buggy," Eszter said as the AI looked around the room.

"Good morning to you too, doc," he replied. "So, we on board now?"

"That is right," Eszter said, pulling out the first of her clothes and opening a cupboard to store them in.

"Should've guessed," Bugsy said. "Cosy in here, ain't it?"

"It is only for a week or so," Eszter replied. "After that, it is boots on the ground."

"Huh, you're sounding like one of the jarheads already," Bugsy said.

Eszter gave a quiet snort of laughter at that comment.

"Speaking of jarheads," she said, leaning over her laptop and selecting an icon on its desktop screen. "It's bootcamp time, Bugsy."

"Alright, let's do this!" Bugsy declared, clapping his hands together, a Tommy Gun appearing in the grip of his holographic avatar.

The program she had selected was a compilation of previously encountered Forerunner counter-hacking protocols gathered together by various UNSC science teams under the Infinity Initiative. A selection of various executables appeared before her, and she picked a few of them to create a dummy Forerunner firewall.

"Go!" she said. Bugsy's only reply was to lower his virtual weapon and squeeze the trigger as he began his hack.

She started unpacking the rest of her things while Bugsy was occupied, and it was only after she was putting the last of her clothes away and had pulled out a well-thumbed copy of Franz Bergstrom's 'Forerunners: The Known History' that Bugsy announced; "Finished!"

"Four minutes twelve seconds," Eszter said, looking at her watch. "Not too bad, but it is hardly your best."

"Hey, that was a tough firewall you set up," Bugsy said.

"Perhaps if you did not mess around with the Tommy Gun in your avatar you might get them done quicker," Eszter said, as she set the program to create a randomised firewall to keep Bugsy occupied.

"Hey, I like the Tommy Gun," Bugsy replied. "It adds pizzazz to my hacking."

Eszter shrugged, opening her book to the chapter on known Forerunners, to the entry about the last, tragic hero of their civilisation, the Didact, and the final correspondence that had been recovered between him and his lover, the Librarian. She slid a pair of cans over her ears and selected Driesberg's Seventh Synthony from the music player she had unpacked and settled down to read.

"Oh," she said, flicking one of the earphones off the side of her

head and glancing at Bugsy as his virtual Tommy Gun blazed. "Before I forget, there's a briefing at half nine, after we set off."

"Got it," Bugsy said, not really paying attention.

She put the earphone back on to enjoy her music, and read on to pass the time before the _Venture _set off for the dig.

End
file.